CONNECTIONS

October 6, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Psalm 133, Galatians 3:25-28

Someone once asked Leonard Bernstein to reflect on the creative process by which he did his composing. He said:

> "I sit for long nights all by myself and don't have a thought in my head. I'm dry...I sit at the piano and just improvise -- strum some chords or try a sequence of notes. And then, suddenly, I find one that hits, that suggests something else. The whole point of composing, you see, is not to find one chord or note you love. It is only when they progress to another chord or note that you have meaning..."
>
> ...This is the most exciting moment that can happen in an artist's life. And every time it happens I am grateful for the gift." (See Matthew Fox, A Spirituality Called Compassion, p. 129, from John Ardoit, High Fidelity Magazine, August, 1978).

The essence of creativity, Bernstein seems to be saying, is the making of connections. That life -- I submit -- is a principal, which the human race is discovering in these latter decades of the twentieth century: a simple idea which is so important that the future of the human enterprise depends on it. Life depends on making connections. The idea is not a new one. It has not fared very well throughout the course of human history but it has been there for a long time, in a lovely Hebrew poem, for instance, written and sung as a hymn more than 3,000 years ago...

> "Behold, how good and pleasant it is
> when brothers and sisters dwell in unity!
> It is like the precious oil upon the head,
> running down upon the beard,
> upon the beard of Aaron,
> running down on the collar of his robes!
> It is like the dew of Hermon,
> which falls on the mountains of Zion!
> For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
> life for evermore."

Someone observed recently that all the crises of history seem to be converging in our time. And so the ideas of unity, reconciliation, connectedness in the human family are indeed good and pleasant and absolutely critical.

I love the poetry of this psalm: the wonderful imagery...an elderly man, like an old priest, with flowing white beard, a sign of his dignity and wisdom and many years; carefully cut according to the prescriptions of the Levitical law, to extend down over the collar of his robe...

The image is of a patriarch or a matriarch, or both...the progenitors, of a great family: co-creators, birthers who still are astonished at the miracle they have had

a part in performing: Friends we haven't seen for years visited recently and showed us family pictures. We knew them when they were six of them. Now there are fifteen. There our friends sit in the middle of all those children and grandchildren: with a look of wonder on their faces..."How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity."

I love the ancient image because it evokes other images for me...of hot August Sunday afternoon family reunions, and of the patriarch with white hair, surveying the familiar bedlam from a lawn chair in the only available shade, looking at all he had wrought and thinking, perhaps,..."How good and pleasant it is..."

Or of more recent, closer homecomings, rare and wonderful reunions when brothers and sisters literally come from East and West, from North and South and sit together at table: those moments of amazing grace, when out of the complex dynamics of the past, out of a shared history of victory and defeat, joy and sadness, love and anger, there comes a hint, a whisper, that one's sons and daughters care for one another, enjoy one another. How good and pleasant that is!

That experience is infinitely precious, the ancient poet said. It is precious like the oil which, with grain and wine, was all a people needed to survice. Oil from olives, grown in Tekoa, vineyard of Amos; ground, refined, filtered, salted: oil for cooking the cakes, for annointing the king and the priest, oil for the lamps and to heal the cuts and bruises. Scented oil,particularly precious, to make the face shine, to make one beautiful for a beloved...Oil represents all that is good and fragrant and fertile in God's creation. When people dwell in unity it's like oil, baptizing the head of a beloved old man, running down over his lined and beautiful face, over his beard onto his robe, so abundant, so extravagant, so good.

It is as pleasant as the dew of Hermon: majestic, snow-capped mountain north, in Lebanon. The legendary dew is so abundant it falls like the rain, mysterious, invigorating, refreshing. In the parched-dry hills of northern Israel where the dew from Mt. Hermon falls it is like God's love and life-giving grace.

"How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity." It is like the ultimate benediction: like eternal life.

In the course of a forty-eight hour period last week, the Islamic Jihad executed a Russian hostage and boasted of killing an American. Fighting between Moslems and Syrians and Lebanese Christians escalated in Tripoli, and Israel bombed a Palastini Liberation Organization base in Tunisia, using American F-15 jet fighters. The dew, I am told, still falls on Mt. Hermon, on God's sons and daughters who continue the time honored custom of killing one another for the cause of religious truth and political supremacy. Psalm 133 cannot be read honestly without expressing the sadness of God and the judgment of God on the whole human family.

Mark Twain wanted little to do with organized religion, yet wrote and spoke with the incisiveness of an Old Testament prophet with his tragic-comic analysis of the human condition.

> "I built a cage," he wrote, "and in it put a dog and cat. And after a little training I got the dog and cat to the point, where they lived peacably together. Then I introduced a pig, goat, kangaroo, some birds, and a monkey. And after a few adjustments they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such sucesses that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Moslem...a Buddhist...along with a Baptist missionary...and in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage."

God's judgment is in this lovely Psalm because the record is atrocious. The church exists to be a model, to show the rest of the world what it looks like when brothers and sisters dwell in unity. We are the new creation, a colony of God's Kingdom in the middle of the world. Our noblest task is quite simply to show the world the goodness and pleasantness of the life which has been healed by Jesus Christ.

Yet, Reinhold Niehbur could observe in his treatise on the human condition that "religion is often the last battleground between God and humanity." Nowhere is that clearer than in the dismal role religion continues to play in the finely honed game of war. When we are not the combatants we are still found holding the coats of those who are. The Reverend Ian Paisley and his evangelical friends are a major part of the problem in Northern Ireland. The appalling tragedy of Lebanon is not a theological struggle per se, but the people who are killing each other are identifiable by religious labels.

And still Christians are willing to invest time and energy in excluding one another, building up the walls that divide us: instead of showing the world what a united family of humanity might look like, hanging on for dear life to old imperialisms that claim exclusive rights to God's truth. Some of us are actually still debating about whether or not to allow the rest of the family to sit down at the table. The Psalm is a reminder, in Wolfhart Pannenberg's blunt words, that "It is the Lord's Supper, not a church supper." (Christian Spirituality, pg. 48)

When the people of God refuse to live the truth, God finds other ways to get the job done, or the word spoken. So it is that the world seems to be learning what we have always known, but not always been willing to live, namely that in the Kingdom, there is a good and pleasant unity, that divisions are bridged and wounds are healed.

Biologist Lewis Thomas, head of the Sloane Kettering Clinic, essayist and auther, is, I think, a prophet of the Kingdom -- although he might not wish to be saddled with the label. "We are interlocked," Thomas observes,..."we are not just made up, as we had always supposed, of successively enriched packets of our own parts. We are shared, rented, occupied. I cannot feel as separate an entity as I did a few years ago...We are dependent on the rest of life...we are part of the system."

In a striking essay on space travel, Thomas wrote: "Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive...the rising earth, the only exuberant thing in this part of the cosmos... it is far and away the grandest product of collaboration in all of nature." (The Lives of a Cell...)

Thomas's conclusion, expressed with increasing urgency in several books of essays, is that life will survive only if there is a deep and broad conversion in the human spirit, from fragmentation to unity; from competition to cooperation.

Buckminster Fuller, visionary genius saw it too and said it. It is an ultimate fatal error, he taught, to think about the individual apart from the system, even to discuss ethics, politics, economics,apart from the whole family.

And even the entertainers, God bless them, could galvanize the world for one wonderful moment with the pop rock version of Psalm 133:

We are the world
We are the children;
So let's start giving
We're saving our own lives..."

The great issue of the day is not whether we can make more Presbyterians in the Third World -- or not even whether Christianity will keep uP with Islam numerically. The great issue is whether the world and life in the world will survive the great issue for us is whether or not we can muster the courage and creativity to bring what we know about reconciliation into play in a very real and hurting and fragmented world.

On World Communion Sunday, Christian people are challenged to hear the Gospel: to listen to it at precisely those critical points where it challanges personal behavor, attitudes, priorities. The word today is the simple truth that the first and most urgent item on the agenda of the Bible is reconciling, healing, bringing together that which is broken. The essential harmony of things is what the Bible is about: Harmony in nature, in humanity, between people, and within the individual a wholeness, a health, a peace. The Bible is about the ways human beings break apar what God has made whole -- and how God is working with and through his people to put it back together again.

How good and pleasant it is, not only when one family dwells in unity, but when we learn that this unity, this peace and wholeness in the whole creation is what God cares about..."In Christ, you are all one," St. Paul told a gang of contentious quarreling Christians in Galatia. "In Christ," he said, "there is no Jew, Greek, male, female, slave, free." Can you comprehend how radical, how revolutionary that sounded -- to the slave-owning, proud, Jewish men -- to whom it was addressed? "All those ways of defining yourselves at the expense of someone else, all those protective barriers you build around yourselves, are gone now," Paul said. "They are the old order. They are what sin does to the unity and wholeness of God's creation. They are the self-inflicted wounds God wants desperately to heal. Those wounds, that disunity -- are the reasons God has lived among us and died for us in Jesus Christ. In him you are all one."

The hope is here in God's love, incarnate in Jesus Christ: in God's kingdom that, with stubborn persistence, lives within the life of the world and will not die. The hope is that there is more going for creation than us, that Paul was right when he wrote that "in Christ, God sets forth a plan to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph.1:10)

The hope, the eschatalogical vision, the poetry, is the oil on the beard and the extravagant, abundant dew of Mt. Hermon. But in Christ -- God's love in history, we are encouraged to see the realized hope, the actual coming of the kingdom in more modest images: perhaps in simple acts of reconciliation between people -- in forgiveness between husbands and wives, acceptance between parents and children; in strangers reaching across the divisions of anonymity and urban busyness to say to one another, "I care about you: you are important to me": in acts of courageous generosity by which a great urban church opens its arms to a city and expresses in its life the promise of a Kingdom in which justice and love and hope are realities: and in the hidden, healing grace which blooms miraculously in the frantic haste of our living -- and which assures us that we are loved and enables us to make connections -- to heal, and reconcile and love and make whole.

The hope is in Jesus: in his Kingdom breaking into our lives in ways we have to be silent to hear, and look carefully to see. The hope is in a Lord who died for the oneness of the whole family, calls us to confess our brokeness, and to celebrate the healing of his love at a table to which he invites all of us...

So let us come. How good and pleasant it is! Worthy is the Lamb who was slain -- to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!

Amen.